

ISRAEL IN OUR LIVES

ISRAEL IN JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS

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DEAR COLLEAGUE,

As we approach the twenty-first century, we are entering a new period regarding the place of Israel in the lives of contemporary Jews. The historic eras of struggling for a homeland and creating a state are over. The State of Israel has been in existence since 1948. It is a modern country which, while beset with problems and challenges, has established itself as a vibrant and dynamic contemporary Jewish society. Israel has changed; the North American Jewish community has changed; and the world that we live in has changed. Consequently, the challenges facing Israel and world Jewry at the end of the century are different than those faced by the Zionist Movement and the fledgling state in prior decades.

As we enter the new millennium, two educational challenges call out to us. The first challenge is to make Israel a dynamic and living force in the personal life of every modern Jew. While there is little doubt that Israel has become a major factor in the life of the Jewish people as a whole, it is less clear that enough Jews are personally touched and moved by the miracle called Israel. Consequently, great energy needs to be invested in making Israel "speak" to every Jew in a very personal and compelling way. Such a personal connection between Israel and North American Jewry will ideally enrich young people in both societies, as Jews and as human beings.

The second challenge is to significantly increase the number of Jews - particularly young Jews - who visit Israel. We have been successful in bringing Israel's survival needs to the attention of North American Jewry; now we must devote great energy to enabling Jews to actually visit Israel. In the coming decades we should aspire to bring great numbers of Jews to Israel within the framework of meaningful and well-planned educational programs. Indeed a positive Israel Experience can be a vital part of the Jewish education and development of contemporary young people, and our young deserve to have such a wonderful opportunity.

Israel In Our Lives is a series of Guides aimed at helping you to respond to these two challenges. These Guides serve two purposes:

To suggest ways to help you in introducing the idea of Israel into the lives of your constituents in an interesting and accessible manner.

To suggest ways to help you in promoting the idea of a visit to Israel - "The Israel Experience" - as a critical Jewish experience for every young Jew.

These Guides are intended to help lay and professional leaders (rabbis, educators, board members, youth workers, camp directors, early childhood supervisors, and others) in their effort to introduce the idea of Israel and the challenge of an Israel Experience to their constituents. They are not program materials or curricula. Rather, they are planning documents intended to help you in your work. The Guides can be used in staff and in-service sessions devoted to the place of Israel in your organization; in policy planning sessions with your board and professional leadership; in retreats and programs with your constituents and members, and in numerous other ways.

The Guides have been created by teams of North American and Israeli Jewish educators working together. They are part of a new venture now being undertaken by a partnership of North American and Israeli agencies to promote the Israel Experience as a major priority in twenty-first century Jewish life.

The Guide you are holding includes cross-references to other titles in the series *Israel In Our Lives* which you may also find useful in your work. We look forward to receiving your feedback about the issues and suggestions raised in this and complementary Guides in the series. We hope that *Israel In Our Lives* will serve you in your blessed efforts to establish Israel as a deep and rich dimension of the lives of our young and our old.

Barry Chazan, Elan Ezrachi, Rafi Sheniak, Barbara Sutnick
Jerusalem, 1997

ISRAEL IN OUR LIVES

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PART ONE: BACKGROUND

The two and a half million Jews who arrived in the United States between 1881-1914, the peak period of mass immigration to America, began their collective life in the tenements of the country's major urban centers. Seeking a better future for themselves and their children, these immigrants organized activities and institutions that would enable them to attain a higher quality of life. The early involvement of Jews in summer camping followed from this reality. Initially seen as a way of offering refuge from the summer heat to the children of the tenements, Jewish summer camps were set up as part of the established Jewish community's effort to offer sports, recreation, healthy living, and an appreciation of nature to the children of the immigrant families. Such summer camps remained a staple of Jewish communal life until the end of World War II.

The post war period, with its baby boom and widespread economic development in America in general and in the Jewish community in particular, brought new patterns of family and communal life. The move to the suburbs reduced the intimacy of physical proximity among Jews, which had been part of city living. The new "space" of suburbia meant a fresh format for relationships and institutions: expanded roles for synagogues and the emergence of Jewish Community Centers that introduced recreational, cultural, and sports programs to the Jewish communal agenda. This shift in form and content of Jewish personal and institutional life was also reflected in Jewish camping. The new Jewish suburbanites had different standards; they needed a different kind of "space" for their children.



The suburban Jewish family looked to camping to provide an outstanding, unique recreational and social setting. Camps flourished as a new form of child care and a productive use of children's summer time. American Jews seem to have remained

consistent in this dual demand, as Jewish children have always been over-represented statistically in the enrollments of private summer camps.

In the 1950s, the Jewish community's camping organizations began to actively respond to these needs. The various movements (e.g., Zionist, Federation, JCC, Orthodox,

The Growth of American Jewish Camping

Conservative, Reform, and Hebraist) sponsored most educationally oriented Jewish camps, often emphasizing development of future leaders for their movements. A group of private camps owned by Jewish individuals also offered a social-recreational program in a "Jewish environment" — a code term for Jewish

clientele. By providing Jewish families with a setting that was both social-recreational and ideological, camps took on a new institutional importance. What had been the province of the Jewish street was now found in the Jewish summer camp.

The "curricula" of the educational camps in the 1950s and 1960s were concerned with ideological programming and fostering future leadership for the respective movements. Many of these camps were able to offer a different version of "communal living" in the 1960s, with the camp setting being far more acceptable to parents than the general counterculture. The economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s, and the rising costs of maintaining summer camp facilities had significant impact on Jewish summer camps. Extremely high costs of college tuition led to a much younger and reduced pool of applicants for camp jobs. Ever-increasing pressure on college students to gain resume-building experiences during the summer also began to keep many from working at camp for more than one season. These realities have created special staffing challenges for camps.



Today, as documented by the Jewish Community Center Association, there are approximately 125 Jewish-sponsored summer camps in the United States out of a total of 7,000 summer camps. Jewish camps serve only about 20% of the Jewish families choosing a summer camp experience for their children. A look at the “curriculum” of the wide variety of movement-sponsored summer camps suggests that over the past four decades they have responded to the trends and developments of the ever-changing Jewish community.

In the 1990s the need for “being with other Jewish children” (a form of the *landsmanschaft*) became less pressing than it was for the previous generations. At the same time, it became clear to camp sponsors that in order to survive they would have to expand enrollment. This pressure led to a shift from some of the elite leadership programs to a broader based educational approach that would accommodate a wider pool of campers while maintaining some aspects of the intimate summer camp environment.

Approaching the Twenty-First Century

Challenged to compete with the new array of leisure time activities, Jewish camps have, in general, widened their curriculum beyond the standard sports, crafts, and formal ideological education program. Innovations have included extensive camping outside the camp’s site, teen travel opportunities including programs in Israel, specialty courses, etc. Many camps have also adopted programs of Jewish culture and education to meet the growing interest in the spiritual side of Judaism. More successful marketing, coupled with increased demographics, has resulted in the expansion of the Reform and Conservative movements’ camps. Orthodox camps have also experienced increased demand. Jewish cultural and JCC camps have been stable, showing modest increases in enrollment.

PART TWO: THE POWER OF JEWISH CAMPING

Power

Camp has always offered campers an extended peer group experience that is mostly free from the pressures of the adult community. This sense of freedom in an accepting peer community is an extremely powerful aspect of all summer camping. The absence of the daily pressures common to the lives of children today allows the camper to weigh, select, and act on those aspects of the program that appeal to him/her exclusively. Removing the adult world and its expectations opens up possibilities of educational variety and experimentation that are not thinkable outside of camp. Further, the presence of role models who are also frequently seeking to answer the same questions as the campers provides an enormously supportive network for Jewish exploration. Campers can live Shabbat, participate in prayer services, learn Hebrew, and reflect on “Jewish” responses to the troubles of society. They can identify with the triumphs and struggles of the Jews of Israel through a special program or Israel Day, using Hebrew words and expressions and gathering under the Israeli flag. They can experiment with each of these areas without concern about how they will “look.” In a free and unencumbered environment, they are not different; they are mainstream, the only stream, for a month or two of the year. This freedom to test and try Jewish and personal life styles and options is at the core of an informal Jewish education that is truly open.

The appeal of being part of a peer community, and the unspoken or understated feeling of being authentic, is clearly an important aspect of the Jewish summer camp experience. However, one might wonder if some Jewish parents fear that this environment creates too strong a feeling of being different, while they prefer that their children be like the others. Interestingly, this suspicion is bolstered by the fact that camp attendance by day school children in the liberal branches of Judaism is not as high as one might initially expect. Day school parents often explain that the summer

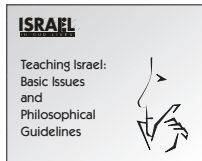
should be used for their children to experience the rest of society, rather than another Jewish environment. In any event, it appears that both groups, day school families and non, attempt to forge a “balance” between Jewish and secular life. Camp is the obvious venue for non-day school children to explore their concentrated “dose” of Jewish and Israel identity.

PART THREE: ISRAEL IN THE JEWISH SUMMER CAMP ENVIRONMENT

Marketing of Jewish summer camps today typically centers on “fun and identity development.” Israel, Zionism, and religious growth are not usually mentioned in camp promotions, or when they are, they are “soft sold.” Israel and Zionism, specifically, are presented as ways that campers can connect to their history and to other important communities of Jews throughout the world. Marketers seem to feel that suggesting to today’s American children (and their parents) that they would feel at home in a camp dedicated to identifying with Israel would not be an effective sales approach. Even so, once part of the Jewish camp environment there are many ways that enjoyable, informative Israel programming can become a means for providing the “fun and identity development” that campers and their parents are seeking.

Israel’s centrality as a feature of American Jewish summer camping mirrors the place of Israel in American Jewish society. Following the creation of the State of Israel, Israel was a glorious and romantic Jewish frontier in the eyes of American Jewry, and certainly for camp programmers. In the psyche of many American Jews, Israel merited pride and attention. The new state seemed to blend the American image of rugged individualism with a dash of socialism. It promised fulfillment of a Jewish “civil religion” of freedom, democracy, progress, and social justice and responsibility. This early image is, however not the only way that today’s American Jews see Israel. Therefore the programming models of yesteryear, based on an idealized image of Israel, do not serve us well today.

Please see...



Israel Programming

The types and amounts of Israeli programming vary among camps. Perhaps most usual are large-scale, Israel-related

events involving more than one age-group. Israel Day is a common centerpiece, focusing on the culture (music, art, sports, foods) and life in Israel, and usually featuring the pre-state and early pioneer period, rather than modern society.

Other Israel programs found at camp include:

- simulated “tours” of Israel
- Hebrew song festivals, in which the latest songs from the Israeli song festivals (general and Hasidic) are learned and sung
- Israel dance festivals
- screenings of Israeli films (reasonably good ones with English sub-titles are available) portraying historical issues of the modern state and general life in Israel
- performances by Israeli artists and entertainers
- Tisha B’av observances. Many camps devote serious programmatic attention to Tisha B’av issues and commemorations, which are often the only encounter that many sectors of the Jewish community have with this summertime fast day. When camps bring Israel into Tisha B’av programming, it will often be to emphasize the historical transition from Temple-based to rabbinic Judaism, to learn about the significance of Jerusalem, and to look at Jewish suffering and “destruction” (*hurban*) and “building” (*binyan*) new forms of Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora. In recent summers, Israeli staff have come to camp trained to help lead Tisha B’av programming. Even so, for many Israelis, their camp participation in a Tisha B’av program is their first experience with the day.

Such large-scale programs, if well-planned and implemented, are made more exciting by the critical mass of participants that they involve. However, they are most effective when complemented by a series of deliberate, omnipresent representations of Israel throughout the camp’s cultural environment.

Elan Ezrachi (1994) lists some of the main programs and structures that are generally utilized by camps seeking to promote an Israel-based culture:

- singing Israeli songs (in Hebrew) in public places
- the use of modern Hebrew
- Israeli folk dancing
- integrating Israeli national symbols such as the flag, anthem, map
- curriculum on Israel: history and contemporary affairs
- culture and arts projects on Israel
- decorating camp in an Israeli motif, with scenery, flora, and sites
- naming parts of the camp after places in Israel
- employing Israelis on the staff.
-

In recent years, a number of Israeli political issues have attracted the attention of American Jewry, with this trend reflected at camps to varying degrees. Although Israeli social/political issues are by and large not central themes of American camping, the movement camps sometimes advocate their perspective within the overall nature of the camp program. Liberal movement camps, for example, may assign program time to dis-

cuss the “Law of Return,” “Who is a Jew,” and the politics of the territories. Camps sponsored by more traditional movements have devoted programmatic resources to similar issues, albeit

Impact of Israeli Politics

from a different perspective. At agency/JCC camps, Israeli staff who attempt to bring such issues into the camp milieu are often frustrated by the relative (as compared to Israelis) political apathy of American youth. Indeed these discussions often underscore the cultural gaps that need to be bridged in order to better integrate Israelis into the camp community (see below).

Please see...



Bringing in Israeli specialists and counselors for the summer season is one way that many Jewish camps and their movements have incorporated Israel, positively exposing Jewish children to the human side of Israel's vibrancy and creativity. Through personal contact with Israelis, campers can come to know Israel as a place where real people live and can share in their challenges and experiences. In the 1950s and 1960s Israelis could not travel easily for financial reasons, so the opportunity to work in North America was very appealing. The camps offered an airplane ticket that was valid for four to five months and a token salary, which attracted many incredibly talented young Israeli artists and personalities to American Jewish summer camps. This practice was formalized when, as Ezrachi writes (1994):

Israelis at Camp

The *Mishlahat* (delegation) program was established in 1964. The idea was to bring talented Israeli counselors, teachers and specialists (music, arts and crafts, etc.) to Ramah to serve on the staff (Cohen 1989, Chazan 1989). The program was operated by the World Zionist Organization and American Zionist Youth Foundation. By the late 1960s the *Mishlahat* program became a standard feature of many camps.

Mishlahat gave the children and staff an opportunity to explore the realities of the Jewish state in a personal and direct way. It also brought to the camp a Hebrew/Judaic work force that was unavailable in the United States. At the same time, however, North

Please see...



American children and staff discovered that Israelis were culturally and linguistically different. The camps had not anticipated the differences, and devoted inadequate attention to processing and understanding them – an investment needed in order to produce the desired educational goals. This failure led to many misunderstandings and at times conflicts between the two groups. The secular Israeli was a very strange creature in an America of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. The Bible expert who had never attended a synagogue was an enigma at best and strange at worst. Israelis were often seen and portrayed as brusque and aggressive. To the Israeli, Americans seemed pampered, naive, and very “*galuti*,” a term filled with pejorative meaning in the Israeli context. “He’s so Israeli!” is an example of an expression that reveals the prevalent lack of understanding of cultural codes.

Camps frequently turn to Israeli staff members and *shlichim* to serve as program specialists. However, clearly defined roles in the areas of sports, culture (music/dance/art), and camping skills often circumscribe the camp’s ability to make effective use of the staff members’ knowledge of Israeli issues and concerns. Israeli educational bodies that send *shlichim* have made some efforts to develop curricular pieces that the *shlichim* can “carry” to camp. Topics include Hebrew language, T’isha B’av observances, and current issues within Israeli society. Although conceptually strong, these specific preparations frequently fall short on implementation within the camp setting. The attempt to create “mass” programming to be instituted by Israelis with little understanding of American youth and process can be a recipe for failure. Frequently, Israeli staff members are left to fend for themselves without the support needed to be successful. Models that integrate American staff into the delivery of this programming tend to have a stronger impact at camp.

The changes that came after the Yom Kippur War affected the quality and nature of the summer camp - Israel relationship. A maturing Israel no longer had the same appeal as the earlier hero/pioneer image. Israel’s expanding economy in the 1970s afforded

Israelis the possibility of travel without the need to work at a summer camp. As a result, by the 1980s, the nature of the Israeli staff had shifted without many American camp professionals noticing. The average age declined, and many talented Israelis who could now find attractive employment on the open market were no longer attracted to this framework. While many friendships have been formed, and many positive cultural events have taken place, the overall effect of the changing contribution of Israeli staff at American Jewish summer camps has yet to be studied.



An important aspect of Jewish summer camping is the Israel travel program. All of the movement camps and many of the private Jewish camps take their older adolescent groups to Israel for an “Israel Experience” (educational travel to Israel). Participants spend several weeks touring and learning about the country with Israeli informal educators and interfacing with representatives of their movements in Israel. These trips seem to have discernible impact on the late adolescent. Steven M. Cohen has pointed out that participants in this kind of trip are usually highly motivated and committed teenagers. Their predisposition to enjoy the experience helps make the visit a positive one, and the exposure to a total Jewish environment different from what they experience in their home communities positively influences the participants’ attitude and commitment. The combined impact of the summer camp tour and the predisposition to enjoy the Israeli visit seem to “work” in terms of strengthened Jewish identity.

Israel Travel Program

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PART FOUR: SPRINGBOARDS TO THE FUTURE OF CAMPING

Camping is an extraordinary vehicle for developing identity, independence, and personal/communal awareness. Camp is a place brimming with potential to help an individual grow. It is here, too, that campers and counselors often discover a sense of their Jewish identity and establish lifelong relationships with other Jews. Indeed, the long term effectiveness of a camping program is ultimately traceable to the strength and intensity of the relationships that form there. This is perhaps the key to incorporating Israel more effectively into the camp environment.



We believe that one of the most effective ways to incorporate Israel at camp would be to connect our campers and counselors in a meaningful and satisfying way with Israelis. This requires that the following issues be addressed:

CULTURAL STYLES

Israeli staff usually have limited exposure to the nature of American children. Overwhelmed by differences in culture, they arrive at the camp without an adequate understanding of the needs of North Americans. Appropriate, well-planned cultural orientation programs are needed, to be supplemented by a dedicated support network at camp.

More attention need also be given to integrating the Israelis into the lives of their American peers. This objective is often left to chance, with the result that

Meaningful Connections With Israelis

shyness and cultural barriers stand in the way of meaningful encounters. Programming deliberately designed to encourage the two groups to interact meaningfully is the best way to turn potentially awkward relationships into mutually beneficial ones. A buddy system that allows time for personal “talk” about life, dreams, and concerns is another way to allow both sides the possibility of the intimate type of contact that camping can offer.

Please see...



Encouraging staff from different sectors of Israeli society to share their personal stories, experiences, and views about life in Israel can help make Israel more “real” and multi-faceted for their North American peers. An important role of Israelis who are specialists at camp should be to speak about and demonstrate the richness of Israeli arts, drama, sports, and music to campers, enabling them to experience an expanded range of Jewish expression. Older campers and staff can benefit by reflecting on those Israeli cultural elements that may seem “foreign” to them and discussing why that might be. Again, such information and idea exchanges must not be left to chance; their success depends on properly designed and facilitated programming. Ideally, they will also be true exchanges, with North Americans also sharing their varieties of cultural expression with the Israelis.

LONGEVITY OF SERVICE

A significant relationship with a camp community is difficult to form on a short term basis. Engaging Israeli staff for a minimum of two years would benefit the camp’s overall program. Such a time framework allows the Israeli staff member to develop a stronger understanding of the cultural milieu of the camp and also gain the support of his/her American peers. The result would be far better integration of Israeli cultural programming, as opposed to the attempt to make time for what appears to be a solitary effort by a small group of (rather unknown) Israelis.

Camps that are unable to have the same Israeli staff return year after year would benefit from a system in which American staff serve as buddies or mentors to arriving Israeli peers. This would further provide a vehicle for the Americans to learn about and buy into the program.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EXISTING ISRAELI MOVEMENTS

Alliances between North American camp-sponsoring movements (religious, Zionist, and/or cultural) and their Israeli counterparts could serve to afford a more natural integration of Israeli staff members into the camp community. Further, the camp experience would not remain an isolated one for the Israelis. Upon return to Israel, they would be likely to progress within the Israeli movement, and their personal relations with those they met during the summer would contribute to long term alliances between the movement and the camp. One sector that easily lends itself to this idea includes the various American movements that help sponsor kibbutzim/moshavim in Israel. Members of these Israeli communities might find working at their movement's camp an effective way to strengthen bonds and provide a service to the overall Jewish community. Fostering this kind of relationship would require the specific movements to carefully consider their current relationship with their counterparts across the ocean. That there have been limited connections among the "natural partners" suggests that a concerted approach by key movement leadership is needed.

FORGING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN NORTH AMERICAN AND ISRAELI CHILDREN

Relationships among adult staff is one significant way to bring cultures closer together; perhaps more dramatic would be a system that allows campers to develop cross cultural skills and relationships. Camps are a unique venue within which this can occur, and we can follow guidelines similar to those used for staff. Already many North American camps serve an international Jewish clientele, but with only marginal representation of

Israeli children. Encouraging cultural sharing by inviting Israeli children to North American camps would enrich the experience for all participants. Further, it will allow campers to build solid relationships with Israelis who, having grown with their American friends at camp, will share Israel with the American teens when the latter travel to Israel. Many camps currently sponsor Israel travel programs for older campers and/or staff. Previously established ties with Israeli children would enhance this travel experience and provide for significant cross-cultural understanding.

ISRAELI STAFF AND JEWISH IDENTITY

It is time to re-conceptualize the role that Israeli staff can play in helping to promote a sense of Jewish culture and identity at Jewish summer camps. Since the Israeli staff can be models of the varieties of Jewish identity, we therefore propose that the Israelis who are invited to camp reflect as many aspects of that identity as possible within the confines of budget. Artists, sports personalities, secular, religious, Ashkenazi, and Sephardi staff, to mention some more apparent variations, should be present in the American Jewish camp. Their role should be expanded to provide maximum personal contact with counselors and campers. The depth of inter-relating between Israeli and American staff should not be left to chance. It is important to utilize programming materials specially designed to promote meaningful interactions between Israeli and Diaspora teens, such as those produced by the Bronfman Centre: Mifgashim (in Jerusalem).

The accepted practice of seeing the *mishlahat* as an almost separate entity only results in growing alienation at a time when we should be exposing our campers and American staff more fully to members of our Jewish extended family. Experience has shown that the two groups will not integrate naturally if left to their own devices; deliberately designed structures and carefully planned cross-cultural programming is what is needed to ensure that both groups grow to appreciate each other's differences and eventually

find common ground. In the various camp settings this will begin with rearranged living arrangements, dining room seating plans, coordinated days off, and the like. It will also require a serious attempt to address the different social and cultural milieu of the two communities through directed discussions and informal educational activities. We must introduce Israeli staff to the richness and variety of the American Jewish community as well as its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The Americans, at the same time, must be trained to view “Israeli” as complex as any other Jewish identity. The social and cultural patterns of each group, plus their shared identity, should be the focus for staff development and camp programming, including the arts, music, sports, and the broad activities of camp life. The issues and challenges facing today’s Israel should be discussed, rather than the pioneering Israel of yesteryear that Israel education often falls back upon. Once each population recognizes the other’s identity, it will be able to examine its own identity in a new light. In these ways, Israeli staff can become another representative of positive Jewish identity, real people with real ideas and aspirations, and not simply an answer to a personnel shortage.



CULTURAL DIALOG

In order to build a cultural language that can be shared in common with Israelis and Jews throughout the world, campers and counselors must develop the necessary cultural tools, and possibly linguistic tools as well. Efforts to involve American camp

professionals in the development and implementation of cross-cultural programming will also assist in the ultimate success of the endeavor. Camp is a place where two cultures can merge.

Israeli Culture at Camp

ISRAEL PROGRAMMING MATERIALS SUITABLE FOR CAMP

Camp staff, particularly program planners, must have access to better resources for developing high quality programs with Israel content, utilizing art, drama, music, sports, and special events. Often, suitable programming materials exist, but camp staff are simply too removed from resource centers to access them during the summer. The logistical challenge of bringing existing materials, and sometimes also subject-matter experts, to camp must be addressed. One solution is for regional Israel resource centers to develop traveling “camp caravans” that visit the various Jewish camps in the region throughout the summer, bringing materials, professional consultation, and perhaps even ready-to-use Israel programs. Another, recently adopted by some camps, is to create an Israel Center at camp itself. The center serves as a storehouses of resource materials about Israel, a cross-cultural gathering place, and a physical representation of Israel at camp. An Israel center decorated with posters and having a significant library of music, films, and information, along with an inviting staff, can be the catalyst of Israel’s meaningful entree into the camp program.

Camp programmers and educational staff should be encouraged to look for the natural connections between Israel and daily life at camp. The UAHC’s Eisner Camp, for example, focused on a contemporary Israel issue during an exploration of *Birkhat Hamazon*, the grace after meals (routinely recited at most Jewish camps). Campers were encouraged to build human pyramids, with returning campers on the bottom and new campers on the top — thus “rebuilding” camp after nine months of dormancy. This activity served as a back-drop for discussions of what it might mean to “rebuild” Jerusalem — a key concept in the *Birkhat Hamazon* — in our day.

DEVELOPING A LONG-TERM VISION

Our approach to Israel needs to go beyond an adaptation of the classic model. After all, the summer experience has been pegged to be something special and unique. The typical

American camp selects a theme for the summer, embodying an idea or ideal often removed from the day to day reality of the child. Our notion of camping, however, requires that we develop an approach that is real and authentic for campers and counselors. The integration of Israel into the consciousness of North American Jewry requires that the connection lasts longer than the summer. Somehow the efforts that we make at camp should be part of a long term vision of a relationship with the many aspects of Israel. Bringing an appropriate sense of Israel to camp, without stereotyping or being trite, constitutes a significant struggle. But if successful, cross-fertilization between Israeli and American youth will occur within the context of a potentially broader and more honest relationship.

HEBREW LANGUAGE

Only a few of the camps have given serious thought to the issue of language. Most camps that feature Hebrew usually include only some “environmental” Hebrew in their facilities and programming: Hebrew signs around camp, Hebrew names for teams and cabins, key announcements in Hebrew. This is a worthwhile endeavor and should be increased wherever possible. However, among camps interested in teaching Hebrew, many have yet to update themselves about suitable approaches and materials for foreign language acquisition in the camp setting.

Indeed the safety of the camp environment can be an ideal setting for language learning: camp is a place where a young person can experiment, make mistakes, and forge ahead without concern for tests or progress reports. Jewish summer camps must overcome the language barrier if they are to provide a well-rounded environment for exploring alternatives in Jewish life today. Hebrew is more than a foreign language; it is central to the heritage of our people and important for communicating with Jews across the ocean. Undertaking to teach or learn our heritage language is an important statement of intent.

An encouraging development in recent years has been the joining of several of the camping movements (Ramah, NFTY, Young Judaea) with the Jewish Agency's Department of Education to bring Hebrew facilitators into the daily life of camp. These facilitators have succeeded in activating Hebrew in camp life. The very presence of the facilitator is a bold and effective statement to the camper: Hebrew does count, and we will help you try to join the circle of Hebrew speakers!



In a carefully designed, forward-looking approach to Israel at camp, all Israel programming and staffing policies should lead up to a well-integrated highlight: the Israel Experience trip. By the time the camper has reached mid to late adolescence he or she is ready for that all-important, educational trip to Israel. This is also an opportunity for a reunion in Israel of former Israeli campers and *mishlahat* members with the campers and staff people with whom they worked. A home hospitality program, or “*mifgash*” (programmed encounter), with former camp friends (and other Israeli peers) would personalize the Israel Experiences and reinforce learning about and emotional connections to Israel. It is ideal to arrange a parents' trip parallel to this teen trip so that teenagers can share their ideas and Israeli friends with their parents. The opportunity for the camper to teach the parent about life in Israel can be a powerful educational experience for both parent and child.



All educators know that the success of even the best facility and the best program depends on a high quality staff. Developing a sense of shared goals and direction among the staff is also essential to creating a model of behavior for the campers. If the Jewish camping tradition is to remain a key component of the total Jewish educational program,

The Israel Experience



Staff Recruitment and Training

communities must make camp summer employment attractive to the appropriate candidates. The rising cost of university tuition in the last decade has been one factor contributing to the lack of quality staff available for the camps at large; students seek higher paying jobs. Another factor has been the desire of college age staffers to attain work experience in their chosen fields of study. These competitive factors cannot be dismissed without a clear understanding of the consequences.

Once camps have recruited and hired their counselors and specialists, they also require an effective training program to fill in knowledge gaps (particularly about Israel) and to teach these young educators how to turn their good intentions into effective, age-and-camp-appropriate educational techniques. This is a major challenge to the camping community.

STAFF SEMINARS IN ISRAEL

Although many college age camp staff have participated in student missions to Israel (sponsored by Federations) and other touring and leadership programs, the impact of this type of ad hoc staff exposure to Israel is often not felt at camp. A more effective form of training, and one very promising development on the staff training scene, is a camp staff seminar in Israel prior to the summer. Key staff members in a given camp or movement are chosen to participate in a program of educational touring with Israeli informal educators, exploring Jewish identity and Israel-related issues, and developing programming materials to take back to camp. In some cases, such as the C.I.T. program at Kadima camps or the Yavne camp serving Boston, an entire age group is brought to Israel to receive its training as future camp staff. Several JCC-affiliated camps have brought their staffs to Israel during the winter months for intensive two-week seminars by the JCC Association. Herein lies not only an excellent

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opportunity to utilize the educational resources of Israel, but also a message: to be a qualified young Jewish leader (i.e., a camp staff member) you must have a meaningful Israel Experience under your belt.

The full impact of these programs is felt when trainees return to a camp environment that is receptive to incorporating the new ideas and programs that they have explored and developed while in Israel. Perhaps the best way to ensure this is for camp directors and other high-level administrators to themselves take part in training seminars in Israel. An exciting model is provided by the Montreal Jewish Education Council (the community's Central Agency for Jewish Education) which brought together camp directors from five camps serving the Montreal area for a special in-service seminar in Israel. This became an important complement to the Israel camp staff seminars that the community has been running for several years.

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Further development of these important opportunities will require that adequate funding be made available for people at all levels of the camp structure to learn and grow in Israel. This is the case even though organizations often view staff trips to Israel as a perk, with staff asked to underwrite a portion of their trip expenses. It is further imperative that field practitioners be actively involved in the development of training experiences. Frequently agency/organization executives (locally and in Israel) do the planning of programs for practitioners. This step-away-from-the-field approach can result in the program missing its mark. While programs need to be diversified and meaningful enough to appeal to the broad range of North Americans involved in camping, they are ideally tailored to the specific camp population and setting to which the staff will be returning.

INVOLVING CAMP DIRECTORS IN RECRUITING ISRAELI STAFF

Camp directors who have a personal involvement in Israel are more likely to work toward developing a strong Israel connection at camp. Such involvement can be fostered by directors regularly visiting and meeting with Israelis (perhaps as they take part in their own camp directors' seminar, discussed above). At present, camp directors are seldom involved in the initial recruitment and interviewing of Israelis; development of a system that encourages them to have a role in staff recruitment on Israeli campuses would reap rewards. In addition, a regular presence of camp directors on Israeli college campuses would encourage Israelis to pursue summer service at North American Jewish camps.

Another area to explore is the development of a cadre of trained Israelis to provide highly skilled service to camps in North America. Several American camps have experimented with providing college credit for camp service. Perhaps such an arrangement would be advantageous for Israeli schools to consider as well. The possibility of camp directors serving as adjunct faculty or teaching guests for the Israeli college or university, particularly for students involved in studying American culture, informal education, child development, recreation, or management, could offer mutual benefits.

A FINAL WORD

Jewish educational camping of the late 1990s has moved far beyond concerns for the fresh air needs of urban Jewish children. Camping today is an extraordinary vehicle for helping young people develop personal identity, Jewish identity, and connection to Israel in an age that challenges our children's identity and values on a daily basis. The intimacy of the total camp environment allows individuals to form lasting relationships with those who have a similar sense of personal and communal identity. Currently there is an encouraging initiative to represent informal education, specifically camping professions, through a national body (The North American Alliance for Jewish Youth). This holds promise for bringing camping and informal education to a more central position in the American Jewish educational community. If we are serious about responding to the challenge of Jewish and Israel identity formation through camping, then we must move to establish such a forum. This body could provide guidance, support, and policy direction in the challenges of Jewish summer camp education. Further, it may be helpful in enhancing the position of informal education overall, and camping specifically, on the national agenda of the Jewish community.

Jewish camping can transform the lives of the individuals it touches and connect young people to a sense of living Judaism and to Israel. The informal education it provides is a legitimate field of education. It warrants investment in competent, well-trained personnel to offer this experience in the best possible way to Jewish children. Camping can also strengthen the connection of campers and staff to modern Israel, but its full potential in this area has yet to be realized.

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